

Can Culture Unite a Fragile World and Trigger Progress?

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I Introduction

To essay an answer to that question, we must first define a few terms. Let's begin with:

“progress.”

The other papers contain various approaches to this. I use one that views progress as a long-term improvement in people's lives. At the same time, I am aware that the term “improvement” sparks entirely new discussions. (When is something “improved”? Who defines that?) Closely related to the term “progress” is that of “innovation.”

To me, the connection between the two seems clear: Innovation can be a precondition for progress, but not every innovation necessarily promotes or facilitates progress.

For example, I do not discern any progress in the humanity-obliterating potential of the innovation that was the atom bomb.

Nor is innovation necessarily a precondition for progress. In many cases, to achieve progress, it would be sufficient to use or implement things that have long been known to humankind.

Let's turn now to the term “culture.”

It has been the subject of myriad definitions through the years, and it remains so today. Some are broad and include the behavior, values, social orders, etc. of entire societies – usually, roughly speaking, in contrast to “nature.”

Others consider either only subcultures and elements belonging to or expressions of a society's overall culture. In the context of cultural policy, for example, one often hears “art and culture” used synonymously, essentially referring to the fine arts (visual arts, literature, music, dance, theatre, etc.), or, today, to all those formats that disrupt or combine traditional definitions of “art” (installations, artistic interventions of all sorts, activist art, etc.).

Since I was asked to contribute my thoughts in my role as a writer, I will use this definition of culture in the text that follows: culture / fine arts.

Colloquially, one usually hears “the arts” shortened to “art,” which I will also do here for simplicity's sake.

Let us then rephrase the title thus:

I Can Art Unite a Fragile World and Trigger Progress?

This focus on “art and culture” as “the arts,” or “art” for short, necessitates a further definition, namely that of “the arts” or “art.”

As with “culture,” these terms have been and still are subject to persistently changing definitions and meanings.

For a long while, all that was (well) done was called art. Phrases such as “the art of loving” are vestiges of those times.

It was not until the European Renaissance that a distinction was made between artists and craftsmen and, with that, a separate position given to “the work of art.” And it was not until the Enlightenment that art as such was accorded its own role in society, and only then did it develop into a subsystem, with the “fine arts” essentially establishing themselves as its protagonists.

Which is what makes the subject of this paper possible in the first place.

Art’s essence and its aim have been hotly debated ever since.

The definition of what should be viewed as a work of art and what should not has engendered ongoing discussion, even within certain eras, societies and milieus.

The expectation society had of art in the age of Goethe and Schiller – that it should be “edifying” – has long been superseded by more recent discussions, interpretations and expectations, even if this 200-year-old attitude continues to prevail in certain circles.

Likewise, the assessment of quality – whether a given artwork is “good” or “bad” – remains the subject of debate.

I The Power of Art

The enormous power that art has within societies can be illustrated by a few simple examples:

After coming to power in 1933, the National Socialists banned from public view all art in Germany that did not align with their ideology – essentially, what was and is referred to as modern art. The Nazis deemed it “degenerate art.” Certain books were burned, certain music banned, their creators forced into obscurity, exiled, murdered.

Another well-known example is the fatwa issued in 1989 by Iran’s revolutionary leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, against the author of the novel “The Satanic Verses”, Salman Rushdie.

If one looks at human history as a whole, one thing is clear: Since time immemorial, social movements and actors have tried either to deploy artistic means of expression to their own ends, meaning for propaganda purposes, or to limit, defame or even destroy those that did not fit into their world view or refused to be instrumentalized.

Any attempt to reserve the right to set definitions usually has to do with the desire to make distinctions and exert power. If one describes something as non-art or bad art, one attempts to elevate oneself above other groups and deny them their abilities, identities and standards.

Incidentally, this is not an exclusive hallmark of despotic or illiberal systems, but has manifested time and again in democracies: One recalls, for example, former US President Donald Trump’s executive order of December 2020 on “Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture,” in which he states his preferred style for public buildings, namely a classical Greco-Roman or other traditional design. Modern architecture is denigrated as “ugly and inconsistent.”

What these movements and actors have in common is that they were and are aware of the enormous social power that artistic expression has.

What they also have in common, however, is a fundamental inability to comprehend one of art's basic traits: It creates new, unfamiliar and different experiences in – and perspectives on – the world of its viewers.

Art alters its own context.

Digression: Some people are glad to have new experiences and gain new perspectives, to develop; many, however, are unsettled by the new or unfamiliar, which is why they reject it, at least at first. A person can even be pleased about something new or unfamiliar in one situation or context and shy away from or reject it in others. This is what separates art from craft. The latter might be brilliantly executed, but it generally appeals to the accustomed attitudes of the viewer/listener/reader without offering any noteworthy new experience, conveying the desired security through this continuation of the habitual – even if the boundaries are fluid here, too.

Looking back, art has always done this, even if artworks that, today, we not only do not describe as disturbing, but even as beautiful, once forsook the habitual. In his own lifetime, Vincent van Gogh famously did not sell a single painting, and the pieces painted by the Impressionists, beloved by so many today, were mocked and rejected by the vast majority of their contemporaries, as was later true of many other new movements in the visual arts (Cubism, Abstract Art, Arte Povera, Conceptual Art, etc.). One thinks of countless theatre, musical theatre and opera scandals, from Gerhart Hauptmann's "Before Sunrise" and "The Weavers", which not only revolutionized the theatre of the late 19th century, but, with the introduction of naturalism into the world of theatre frequented by the bourgeoisie, created among the latter an awareness of social situations and classes, an awareness that was also arising in other areas of society, from Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" or Arthur Schnitzler's "La Ronde" – the biggest theatre scandal of the early 20th century – to Thomas Bernhard's "Heldenplatz", to name but a few now at home in the recognized canon.

These examples provide an answer to the second part of the titular question "Can art trigger progress?" – namely, an unequivocal "Yes!"

Further examples can be found among scientists whose discoveries were inspired by science fiction. Or politicians who were inspired by literature – and later became literary figures themselves (e.g. Winston Churchill receiving the 1953 Nobel Prize in Literature).

At the same time, art itself has been enriched and inspired by new realizations from other areas of society (e.g. science, politics, etc.).

It is somewhat paradoxical that the uniqueness and novelty inherent to artworks necessarily atrophy over time. Are older pieces therefore no longer artworks? Here, too, opinions differ.

Is it only "true art" if a play or musical composition that has existed for decades or centuries is performed exactly the way its creator once intended (or the way some people today think the creator once intended)? Or, since its newness has now atrophied, is it no longer a work of art and does it only deserve this appellation once it has been given an innovative interpretation? Or are both definitions permissible, or even necessary?

Is "the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" (Walter Benjamin) and in other ages everything from artwork to artisanry to crafts, to even kitsch – depending on whether the Mona Lisa / La Gioconda was painted by Leonardo da Vinci himself, or by one of his pupils (Mona Lisa del

Prado) or other copyists, or is of unresolved provenance (Isleworth Mona Lisa, etc.) – to simple prints on t-shirts and coffee cups?

And even if we can come to agreement on what art is: Can art unite a fragile society, or which obstacles can it help overcome to create a better future?

Prosperous societies thrive first and foremost by having the greatest possible diversity of individuals and ideas, allowing them to develop innovations and react to new challenges and external shocks more flexibly and resiliently than closed societies and monocultures. The greatest possible diversity arises from the greatest possible freedom and opportunities for experimentation, actual improvement ensues from discussion of the potential offered by the many ideas, i.e.: communication.

Currently, this seems to be one of the greatest challenges facing global society (and individual societies): Despite – or because of? – having better means of communication than at any other time in human history, meaningful exchange seems increasingly difficult or even unwanted almost everywhere and by almost everyone.

II The Impact of Art

This is precisely where art has its impact.

Hardly any other system in our societies has the combined ability to express innovation, diversity, controversy, ambivalence and paradox – to call attention to them, to communicate them – as does art. And all this in a peaceful way.

Again and again, this ability art has to mobilize tempts (and has always tempted) all manner of individuals, including artists themselves, to another limiting gesture (in addition to the prohibitions and destructive acts mentioned above), namely the attempt to instrumentalize art for specific purposes – in short: propaganda.

(Here again, we are confronted with the question of definition and its power: Can propaganda also be art? Or: Can art become (or be used or misused as) propaganda – and, if so, is it still art?)

Yet given its inherently innovative and surprising quality, art – the social subsystem, not the individual artist or the individual artwork – inevitably eludes these attempts or is unsuitable for them.

What results is the paradox that art can indeed unite a fragile world – but only if we do not try to instrumentalize it for that purpose!

On the other hand, we also have the perfect feedback loop: The more we do for art in all its diversity, the more it does for society.

Thus, if – and the emphasis here is on “if” – we want a progressive society, which, to be progressive, must necessarily be as diverse and open as possible, and which must be able to communicate in the best possible manner about the definitions and possibilities of progress, there is only one recommendation I feel can be made:

Artists should make art – of every variety, of every facet, taking it beyond existing boundaries!

And:

Society, promote this best of all playgrounds for peacefully innovating, experimenting and communicating with and about ideas on all levels, in all its facets, with as many resources as possible!